


Iowa Boy




**Chuck
OFFENBURGER**

**For Keillor,
the Surt's up**

He left the Midwest in something of a huff in 1987 for Denmark, and then New York City, where he still lives. But Garrison Keillor now says, "I think I'm on my way back" to the heartland.

Keillor, 40, is probably America's best storyteller today, one of the best writers and, well, at least an enthusiastic singer. All put together, he's a grand performer, and next Saturday he brings his "American Radio Company" show to Clear Lake for a live broadcast from the legendary Surt Ballroom.



Keillor All 1,600 tickets **Coming back?** have been sold for the 5 p.m. show. The two-hour performance will be carried by most public radio stations in Iowa and more than 200 of them across the nation.

When Keillor said Friday that he was on his way back to the Midwest, he wasn't just talking about the radio show in Clear Lake.

More Time Here

"I've bought land and am building a house," he said from St. Paul, Minn., where he was doing some filming for the day. "It's actually east of here, just across the St. Croix River in Wisconsin. But I'll be able to see Minnesota from there, so maybe it's a good place for me to be spending more time out here, but I'll still be living in New York, too."

Keillor, a native of Anoka, Minn., started his "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show on Minnesota Public Radio in 1974. It was a live musical variety show, which featured him doing a monologue of 30 minutes or more on the "News from Lake Wobegon," a mythical small town in Minnesota.

The show was picked up by public radio stations across the nation, and Keillor reluctantly became a celebrity.

Lovesick

His first marriage had long since ended and he had been a companion of Margaret Moon, who was the producer of his radio shows at the time.

Then in 1985, at the 25th reunion of his Anoka High School class, he saw Ulla Shaerovd for the first time since school days. She had been a foreign exchange student from Denmark and had returned to her home country, got married, had four children and then was divorced. At the reunion, Keillor fell "sick to my stomach in love with her," as he's said on his show, and they married.

In 1987, he decided to end "Prairie Home" and go first to New York, then Denmark and finally back to New York.

Was it a good decision to leave the Midwest?

"I've never thought about that," Keillor said. "I just got into my red Blazer, headed east across the Mississippi and kept going. Angry? No, I wasn't angry at all."

Everybody is the guardian of their own life and has a responsibility to themselves to live it as best they can. I think it's the commonest thing that a person comes to a pass in life where they feel hemmed in, caught, trapped.

When that comes, you either hunker down and bear up under it, or guys my age are well-known for cutting everything loose and getting out of it all. That's what I did."

How's It Going?

So, uh, one guy with a checkered romantic past to another. I asked Keillor how his life is now. There's been talk he's headed for another divorce.

"Well, my personal life is interesting," he said. "It's all up in the air — it seems like it always is. It would make a wonderful novel, but the sort of one I wouldn't be capable of writing myself. Oh yes, I'm still married — and to my wife, Ulla. But it's interesting. It's always interesting."

He reportedly gets along well with his son, Jason, who has been a student at the University of Minnesota and who plays guitar and has performed occasionally on the radio show.

Keillor said he also has a warm relationship with his parents.

"They are wonderful a good bit in the winter now," he said. "But they've also just purchased the house I grew

IOWA BOY Please turn to Page 6B

For Keillor, the Surf's up in Iowa

IOWA BOY

Continued from Page 1B

up in outside Atoka. It's a house my father built, board-by-board, so they'll be proud to be getting it back."

Keillor's "American Radio Company" show, which is based in New York, is in its third season. He's taking it on the road for the 15 shows of the season's second half, and the Surf Ballroom show is the first stop. The show was to feature Bob Elliott, well known from the Bob & Ray comedy team. But he had to cancel. Still on the lineup are 14 Karat Soul, a five-voice a cappella "doe-wop" group from New York City, and Bob Fischer and the Coffee Club Orchestra, made up of veterans of the Broadway stage.

The skits in the show are expected to feature Keillor on the Iowa political caucuses, a tribute to rock music legend Buddy Holly, who died in a plane crash after playing at the Surf in 1959, and another to the late Meredith Willson, native son of Mason City and composer of "The Music Man."

Keillor has both personal and professional ties to Iowa.

His grandmother, Dora Powell, was born in Thornton in northern Iowa "and someday I need to go by there," he said. "I just don't know whether there are any traces of the Powell family left there or not."

Keillor lived in Bettendorf for two years as an infant when his father was serving in the Army at the Rock Island Arsenal during World War II.

He has performed in Iowa many times, probably the earliest being in 1976 when he brought his then-fledgling show to the gymnasium of the junior high school in Decorah.

"I still remember that one," he said Friday. "It was one of the very first shows I ever did on the road. We had a local performer on, a wonderful old drunkard of a Norwegian accordion player who was also a pig farmer. Well, perhaps I shouldn't say he was a drunkard, but we had strong suspicions that way."

"He was very reluctant to go on stage, but then when he did we couldn't hardly get him off. He got out there and started telling Ole and Lena jokes, and some of them were pretty ripe. Oh, he was a great entertainer. He pinned that audience to the walls."

There was another well-known appearance by Keillor in Decorah, this one in May 1985 at Luther College, where he was receiving an honorary degree and was then to give the commencement address.

"It was a very hot afternoon and that gymnasium was miserable," said Peter Scholl, a Luther College English professor who is now compiling a book analyzing Keillor's writing and radio work. "What happened was that Keillor started feeling sick and he only spoke for about four minutes. Some folks, I guess, felt they didn't get their money's worth, although Keillor was paid nothing for being there."

Keillor remembers that day, too.

"That speech was surely more than four minutes. It must have been at least eight minutes!" he protested with a laugh. "It was so hot in that gym it was unbearable. People were fainting — I saw them! The place was full of elderly people there to watch their grandchildren graduate, and they were fainting."

"I did what I thought was the good citizenship thing to do. I did the manly thing. I did the Boy Scout thing. I cut my speech short."

"Oh! People at the college were angry! They were absolutely this-lipped! In a very quiet way, they were very upset with me. And I thought, I'd been doing the right thing. But remember, no good deed goes un punished."

Keillor played Luther College at least two other times, and he also has played at UNI, Iowa State and the U of I. His shows often featured Iowa City singers Greg Brown and Dave Moore.

"I was just listening to Davey Moore's new album the other night. If he weren't so shy, he'd be famous. I don't think there is another white kid in the country that has more of a feeling for the blues than Davey Moore."

Keillor spoke glowingly about Iowa.

"From a Minnesotan's point of view, and putting aside all the Iowa jokes, which I never understood at all, I would say that Iowa is everybody's ideal of the heart of the Midwest," he said.

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